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Tuesday, Jul 10, 2007

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Posted on Sat, Jul. 07, 2007

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Prince Rupert, British Columbia, is Prince CharmingBy ANNE Z. COOKE
Special to The Star

PRINCE RUPERT, British Columbia | It's nice to be first on the scene. Or among the first. I would like to have seen the Columbia River when its waters ran free and the Yukon during the Gold Rush. To have explored Kenya in 1930 and Mexico in 1940.

The first travelers didn't always go in style, but they took adventure as it came, coping with places that were rough and dirty, and embracing the strange and wonderful. Remarkable places before they were sanitized for tourism.

Once in a while it still happens. This summer a scant few thousand travelers will drive or fly to Prince Rupert, on British Columbia's northernmost coast, and a few thousand more — Alaska cruise passengers — will drop in each week for a quick look at this still friendly and soon-to-be-discovered town.

Absent, happily, so far, are the ubiquitous dockside stalls selling T-shirts, souvenir grizzly bears made in China, postcard racks and in-your-face street touts offering "two-for-one pitchers at Pedro's."

"We're holding out for quality," said Bruce Wishart, a spokesman for the Prince Rupert Tourism Council, which saw what happened when crowds of cruise passengers overwhelmed tiny Alaskan ports such as Ketchikan, Juneau and Skagway.

According to Wishart, Prince Rupert will be setting the bar high for store keepers and outfitters hoping to set up shop in the historic downtown.

"It won't benefit anybody — us or the tourists — to try to be like everyone else," he said. "We want to avoid Alaska's mistakes."



A modern totem pole greets visitors at the Alaska State Ferry dock in Prince Rupert, British Columbia.



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Still, tourism promises to help the local economy, in decline since 2001, when the last pulp mill closed. As we walked downtown, window shopping and looking in stores, empty aisles and half-stocked shelves told the story. In the pharmacy — where we stopped to compare drug prices — we were the only customers. In the Safeway, no more than a dozen shoppers were filling their baskets.

But for travelers, Prince Rupert isn't about shopping. It's all about being outdoors. We spent a sparkling sunny day with Prince Rupert Adventure Tours, following humpback whales on a luxurious, high-powered lemon-yellow boat, the Georgia Master.

We walked through the rain forest on Pike Island, across the harbor, following Tsimshian guide John Haldane, who donned a hat and native dress to lead a cultural tour of the island's 10,000-year-old pre-European village sites.

The highlight of our visit — and Prince Rupert's leading tourist attraction — was the "Winter Feast" tour at the Museum of Northern British Columbia, ranked among Canada's top 10 museums.

Built in the style of a traditional "long house," with giant red and yellow cedar logs, the museum specializes in pre-European history and art, displaying a prized collection of the elegant and sophisticated arts of the Tsimshian and Haida people, currently about 40 percent of the regional population. The customs and ceremonies of these First Nations craftsmen and artists are embodied in masks, garments, blankets, wood carvings, canoes, headdresses, drums and ceremonial pieces.

"Whenever I'm feeling down about something, I come in here and look at this headpiece, made before the people had metal," said Sam Bryant, the museum's artistic director and a member of the killer whale clan.

He stopped in front of his favorite piece, carved, he said, with a sharpened beaver's tooth. The headdress, a circle of miniature figures, was made from mountain goat horn inlaid with abalone.

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Afterward, Bryant led us to the museum's long house to participate in a shortened version of the "Winter Feast" celebration, a "potlatch" held to celebrate weddings, promotions of chiefs and similar clan milestones. Donning costumes, Bryant and a small performance group, accompanied by two drummers, danced three traditional ceremonies and distributed "gifts" — tastes of local foods — to the onlookers.

"There's nothing mysterious about the potlatch," Bryant said. "Think of it as a birthday party or a wedding reception, where guests bring gifts and the hosts give party favors."

With limited time to spend, we missed some other intriguing outings, including a harbor cruise on the city's restored "heritage tug boat" and a guided trip to the Khutzeymateen (COOT-zee-mah-teen) Grizzly Bear Sanctuary. We also passed up salmon fishing in the ocean with one of the fishing charters docked in Cow Bay. Fishermen who do go out can take home their catch, courtesy of Dolly's Fish Market on the waterfront, which takes orders for flash-freezing and mailing.

"Even if you're *not* a fisherman," said Charmayne Carlson, owner of Dolly's, "you can take some home. We sell canned salmon, frozen salmon and vacuum-packed smoked salmon in the store. And we serve every kind of fresh seafood you can think of here in the restaurant."

Instead of fishing, we saved our last day for a visit to the restored North Pacific Cannery, in nearby Port Edward, the last of dozens once built along this coast. The cannery, a self-contained



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company town, was built entirely on a long row of wood decks set atop pilings sunk into the Skeena River bank.

Beginning in 1889, when the cannery opened and millions of salmon gathering near the mouth of the river seemed inexhaustible, the cannery ran around the clock from May through September. Seventy-nine years later, when the fish were nearly gone (since then, last-ditch conservation projects have restored a portion of the annual spawning run), it finally closed.

The cannery had its own general store, post office, church, processing plant, machine shop, net loft, boat house, cottages for managers and crowded shacks for workers. Those long summer days on the river, later remembered in letters and diaries, described an experience that swung between heaven and hell, both slave labor and summer camp.

"The fishing industry was divided along racial and gender lines," said curator Sophie Cormier, throwing a switch that started the assembly line clanking into action.

The managers and store keeper were Caucasian, Chinese workers made the cans and the Japanese built the boats and mended the nets, she said. Tsimshian men, who traditionally spent summers in native fish camps, netted the salmon, the women worked on the processing line and the children, mostly unsupervised, kept one another company.

An engaging one-woman stage show follows the 40-minute cannery tour, bringing history to life. Half drama and half comedy, the story introduces a cast of characters, each with a different hat and accent, telling his or her story of those bygone times: The Irish manager keeping the books and settling disputes, the Chinese man sending money home to his wife, the Japanese family starting a new life in a strange land, and the children playing as equals.

A few months after our visit to Prince Rupert, we learned that the national and provincial governments had created a joint grant of \$60 million to build a container port at the end of Kaien Island to handle trade with China.

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Prince Rupert, they predicted, could be bigger than Vancouver. The port has the world's third deepest natural harbor, a natural for giant cruise and container ships. And Prince Rupert is the western end of Canada's national highways and the railroad.

Maybe some day. But this summer Prince Rupert is still small-town Canada.

For landlubbers

Take the British Columbia ferry from Vancouver. Or fly from Vancouver to Prince Rupert's airport on Digby Island. Most flights include the combination bus-and-ferry shuttle service that crosses from Digby to Kaien Island. Bus service in Prince Rupert and environs is available but slow. You can get around without a car, but not conveniently.

For sailors

Through Sept. 20, two cruise ships are scheduled to call weekly at Prince Rupert. Royal Caribbean Cruise Line's 2,435-passenger ship, Vision of the Seas, visits each Wednesday; Norwegian Cruise Line's 2200-passenger ship, Norwegian Star, visits each Thursday. Cruise West's Spirit of Oceanus calls on four dates. The Clipper Odyssey and Celebrity's Infinity each call once. Call a cruise agent for special promotions and bookings.

Where to stay

•Andree's B&B, at 314 Fourth Ave. East, is a homey two-story clapboard house with a flower-decorated deck overlooking the harbor. Guests have the run of the ground floor; the atmosphere is casual. A large front room has a harbor view and private bath. An average size room with two twin beds has a corner sink; this room and two others share a bath. Most town



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sights are within walking distance at the bottom of the hill. If you are allergic, know that a cat lives here. Rooms run from about \$65, double. andreesbb.com, or e-mail andreesbb@citytel.net.

•The Crest Hotel, on West First Avenue, has 101 rooms and four suites recently redecorated with a colonial theme. Ceiling moldings, mint green carpets, cool pinks and pale grays predominate. Check out the hallway art consisting of historic prints with Pacific Coast views. Harbor-side rooms have binoculars and bathrobes. Some rooms have minibars; all have coffee makers and hair dryers. Rooms are listed from about \$135, double. cresthotel.bc.ca, 800-663-8150.

To learn more

www.TourismPrinceRupert.com or hellobc.ca.

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Anne Z. Cooke is a freelance writer in Marina del Rey, Calif. | Anne Z. Cooke, Special to The Star



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